

Why Unbelief? Acts 5:33-42

We have been in this chapter, and have seen sin cleansed from the camp of the church. We have seen the blessing of God. We have seen the disciples arrested, and then charged to go right back into the Temple and preach Jesus Christ, and then we saw them arrested again, and then tried by the Sanhedrin. And their defence was the gospel of Jesus Christ. They stood boldly and firm and made Jesus Christ known before these who could sentence them to death, or at least put enough pressure on the Roman authorities to put them to death. The whole chapter is one of high drama.

And this final long paragraph is a really interesting one, and again thrilling one. The Sanhedrin are incensed against the apostles and want to put them to death. Gamaliel, a respected Rabbi and teacher intervenes and they are saved from death. The Sanhedrin have them beaten, and the apostles leave and praise God that they were found worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus. The chapter really ends on a high note. But we also see opposition to the gospel is well entrenched in sinful hearts.

And we often might wonder why we have these narrative sections in the Scripture. And one of the things I love about these sections is that they are history and they read like history. If you are trying to build a religion especially through lies, then you do not record any set backs or opposition. All you record is the positive and glorious responses to your message. All your dreams will come true if you follow Jesus. And when you read these sections, like this final paragraph in this chapter it has an authenticity about it. I think many people who have never read the Scriptures think it is pie and sky kind of stuff. But this is real history and it reads like real history.

But another reason why these are recorded is that we would understand the world we live in, and also what we can expect as far as when the gospel of Jesus is actually proclaimed. I think we still get surprised when there is opposition in the making and maturing of disciples for the glory of Christ. Why do we have opposition? Why would anyone oppose Jesus? Look at the love of God! And the reason is the nature of unbelief. And these narrative passages give examples of what is taught throughout the Scripture in a more formal way that people hate the light because they love darkness. And you can see an example of that hatred right here.

But not only that. It not only is recorded because it is history and help us understand the world around us, but also helps us understand unbelief. We can certainly see unbelief in the world around us, but do we see it in ourselves? That is where it becomes a little more tricky to see. But there are pockets of unbelief in all of us. And as understand the nature of unbelief we start to see it in ourselves and we can bring it into the light of Christ. We tell ourselves lies that go against the very Word of God. It is almost, "I know what the Word of God says, but . . ." And really what we are saying, because say it as strongly as possible, "I know what God says, but . . ." Somehow in our vast wisdom we think we have knowledge that God does not have, or our circumstances and the knowledge we have acquired makes certain passages and truths null and void or obsolete today. But it is nothing but unbelief, and we need to see unbelief is a heart matter. It is something that we choose to believe or not believe because we want what we want. We need to see the nature of unbelief. Think of where you sin and excuse yourself. That is unbelief in God - suppressing his truth.

So I want us to look at two aspects of unbelief this morning. I want to see where unbelief doesn't come from and where it does come from. May God give us light this morning and help us change. If you have never trusted Christ, I am praying that God would cut through the lies you are telling yourself. If you are saved, may God give you an understanding of the world you live in but also the nature of unbelief in your own heart that you may trust in him and believe in him no matter the cost.

1. First of all, let us examine what unbelief is not. V. 33

It is amazing to look at unbelief, and the excuses individuals use for not believing. We can see how unreasonable they are when we see unbelief in others, but we have a hard time again seeing it in ourselves. All of us have something inside of us called a conscience. And our conscience has to somehow work out why we do what we do. It defends and exonerates us of our actions and words or whatever. It says to do what we do is the only thing that could have been done or somehow even though we know it is wrong it is right. Or not to believe on Jesus is also reasonable. But we come back to that conscience because, although we can quiet our conscience we cannot silence it completely, and it witnesses to us that there is not only a God but a day of accountability where I will give an answer for all that I have done in this life.

And look at this verse because it is such an interesting verse, **“When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them.”** And let me read some other translations that can help us understand this verse. the KJV has it this way, **“When they had heard that, they were cut to the heart, and took counsel to slay them.”** NIV, **“When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to out them to death.”** Another translation has, **“And when they heard this, they were cut to the quick and intended to kill them.”** And notice the response of the religious leaders was because, “When they had heard this.” When they had heard the message that the disciples gave. And here is the amazing thing: the gospel always calls for a response. And that response in any given person when it is truly understood is always a strong response at either end of the spectrum. And the reason why is God's Word and God's gospel exposes them. And we should not be surprised.

Listen to Hebrews 4:12-13, **“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”** It is able discern the secret recesses of the heart. It is able to truly show sin in all of its horrors and what it deserves, and how repugnant it is to God and against his glory. it is able to show need in each one of our lives. Also shows the grace of God in Christ. And if you are here this morning, you know the glorious power of God's Word to expose you, to show the real you. You love, like all of us to pretend or tell yourself a lie, but scripture exposes us from thew inside out, and leaves us without any excuse.

And so now the question becomes what do you do with this knowledge, with this search light that exposes our sin and need? Well, listen to the response to the crowd on the day of Pentecost because in many ways it sounds like the beginning of our verse here, **“Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to**

Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’” (Acts 2:37). They were cut to heart. Their guilt before a holy God and calling on Jesus to be executed and rejecting him as their Messiah was all too evident. And they were “cut to the heart.” It is like the expression here. Listen to KJV rendering again, **“When they had heard that, they were cut to the heart, and took counsel to slay them.”** Do you hear the language. It is the same. They were cut to the heart. They were exposed. They complain if you go on teaching everyone will think we are guilty. And the message is you are guilty, but the good news is there is forgiveness found in Jesus. The only difference here between the two is not what is being exposed in the heart, but what comes out of the heart. One is repentance and faith - “what shall we do,” and the other is hostility and rage, they “wanted to kill them.” Do you see the strong response? Do you see the different response?

Now why is that so important to see? It is so important to see because the moment we see that this is a matter of the heart and our guilt before God is the moment that our inner conscience wants to rise to our defence. We want to quiet that guilt before God, so we have to busy our minds with thoughts with why we are right in rejecting Christ and his Word and his gospel. But now we are in a position to answer the question of what unbelief is and isn't. As we look at this example here there are things that we should see that are common back then and today with what unbelief is or is not.

2. What unbelief isn't.

Think about it, because we will try to make excuses for our unbelief to make it look intelligent and rational. And we are also creatures of habit. And one of the habitual things that people do is they repeat things as if they are fact without thinking through them. We live in a social media world where we get little morsels of info and repeat it as truth. Our minds become accustomed to this and we cannot follow longer arguments to arrive at truth. And here is one of the ways that people excuse their unbelief: modern people and scientific people do not believe in what people back then believed in. We have come too far in our modernity and learning to believe the things they did back then. Have heard that or used that excuse about something in your life?

Now think of the assumption, because the assumption is first of all that you did not have any unbelief back in Biblical times, but it must be obvious from our text, and the Sanhedrin's refusal to believe that unbelief existed back then just as it does today. There were people who mock, scorned, and ridiculed believers and their beliefs just like they do today. A Saviour hanging on a tree who is God, get real!! The other thing is, the argument we live in a modern world has nothing to do with unbelief. I love many of the aspects of the modern world from tablets and cell phones, to the latest in breakthroughs for many diseases, to everything that makes my life easier. But what does modernity have to do or how does it explain the mess we are in today? With all the advancements our world has made just watch the evening news. Why is their such wickedness and violence? Why do wars still rage? How does it explain the things we see in Israel or the Ukraine? How does the modern world or even science explain the issues of the human heart? To say we are more complex than they were back then does not explain anything. It does not explain your sin or my sin.

And this is where we have to be so careful even as believers. We can accept many of the common assumptions of so-called advancements or understandings to explain behaviour today that excuses our sin. The most common is I this condition or disorder. It is physical and I am not responsible for my behaviour. And the individuals in those fields cannot explain what they believe. When push comes to shove they have to admit that people make real choices that they are responsible for. But even as believers we can look for ways to excuse our behaviour. I have such and such condition. It does not mean that we are made differently, and are more susceptible to certain temptations. And if that is the case, Jesus and his forgiveness and freedom to follow him becomes the second best news. He is not what I really need. But it is unbelief in God, just like these men here. They know Jesus is alive, have seen miracles done in his name but refuse to believe. Unbelief, just like these men will try to excuse behaviour and choices. For them it is to eliminate those who would cause the guilt or point out the guilt. What excuses are you making, denying what the Scriptures say and living in unbelief? God wants you to see past the lies of your human heart.

3. What is unbelief and where does it come from?

It is amazing, because the argument many times goes like this. Those who are followers of Jesus are just intellectually weak. They have their minds closed off, or they are so scared of the after life that they live very confined and restrictive lives both physically and intellectually. The reason I reject Jesus has nothing to do with fear or with emotion but is completely rational and without emotion. It is like one gentleman that scoffed at my beliefs. I would love to talk to you but I really do not want to burst your bubble and hurt your feelings. In other words - your faith does not stand against any scrutiny.

But is that what you have here in our text? Do you have the rational aspect of man engaged and that alone? Is it that these sophisticated and educated men, which they were, are just too intellectually superior and beyond the apostles? I mean the whole response is dripping with emotion. Look at verse 33 again, **“When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them.”** There were cut open in the deepest recesses of their souls. And they were moved in that rage to kill the disciples. It hardly seems level-headed and rational and free from all emotions. And here is the question. What led to that response? And we already said it. Listen again to verses 30-31, **“The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.”** Think of what led to this strong emotional response. Think of why people get so angry with the gospel. I mean what is the great crime? It is indicating, yes we are all sinners, but God in his love has made a way to be reconciled to him, to have eternal forgiveness through his Son. They are arrested without any formal charge. They are now threatened with death and later beaten, and why? It is because of this message that has at its centre none other than the love of Jesus Christ. And think, if you are rejecting and hating Christianity this morning, why do you hate it so much? Why do you hate the message of a crucified Messiah for the eternal welfare of all that believe on him?

People will further argue it is the influence Christianity has on others, and it makes them terrible people. And I know there are examples of that. But again, what have these men done? Well, they healed the man at the gate beautiful who was lame from birth. We see earlier that they were healing all who came to them. They were doing good in the name of Jesus. People's whole lives were changed. Think how Christianity has taken drunks and made them family people who I give to society and function toward others in love. Think how many families have been put back together through Christ. Think that the whole hospital movement and even education has been spurred on through Christianity. The greatest moral movement for good in our world has always been Christianity. People will point out sin in the church here and there, and yes there are blemishes, but they are the exceptions, and certainly a counterfeit of real faith in Christ. God in his glory changes hearts and changes lives, and it is not just for our welfare but for the good of others. I mean for many of you, what would your life have looked like if you did not come to Christ? What would the lives of your families and even others where God has used you as a positive influence look like?

It should encourage the hearts of all who follow him with the power of the gospel to do so much good, even in the face of opposition. But it also should be a wake-up call for all those who reject and vehemently and emotionally reject the gospel. Remember, this message always calls for a response, and when it is understood, it always engenders the deepest recesses of our souls, including deep emotions. So if you are rejecting Christ this morning, why are you doing it? And the answer is right there is the verse we looked at this morning. They were cut in the heart. They were laid open. They came face to face with their sin before a holy God, and the call was to turn in repentant faith to Jesus. But listen John's explanation, really God's explanation of why individuals refuse to bow the knee to Jesus, and really ask if this describes you, John 3:19-20, **"And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed."**

The Beatles had a very popular song that is still sung today of how to end all the problems in the world and it was, "All You Need is Love." But according to this passage, the problem is not that we are not loving enough. The problem is what we love. The text says, **"people loved darkness."** So as you look at the religious leaders, they loved their positions, their lifestyles, the respect of the people, even their so-called morality. They loved the thought they were better than others. And here is the gospel - you are guilty. You put this innocent man to death. But God is merciful and loving like no other. He will forgive you through that very death. It is a blow to their pride, and it is a blow to their self-love. If they trusted in Jesus than all that would have to change. There would have to be an exchange of loves. And oh, what a glorious exchange. Christians sing out with enthusiasm, "I'd rather have Jesus than anything!" He is their first love, and this love is deeply intellectual and emotional.

But here is the question this morning, what do you love? How does Jesus confront what you love the most in your life? It is so easy to smear and ridicule and through out innuendos about Christianity. It is so easy to try and cover your rejection of Jesus just saying it is intellectual. But come clean. There is something going on in your

heart of hearts. There is always something going on in your conscience. And the gospel is telling you something you do not want to hear. There is something desperately wrong with you and me and everyone. It cuts at your pride. It opens you up, and be honest - that is what you hate. That is why you reject the message.

But just because you reject the message does not change the problem of your sin before a holy God. And here is grace and amazing love. God is calling you today. It is not too late. Come and believe on him. Come with the other redeemed sinners to Christ. Your song will become, "I'd rather have Jesus than anything." And this passage really helps us as believers to understand what we see today, nothing really has changed. But here is the other thing - God through his mercy is still changing hearts and lives through the gospel. Let us seek to keep on keeping on in making and maturing disciples for his glory. Let us keep on preaching Christ and living for him.